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Recommended Citation

Neblett, Sally, "Grenada's Saga: Feast Of Bitter Fruit Of Change" (1967). *Clippings*. 276.
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Grenada's Saga: Feast Of 'Bitter Fruit Of Change'

By Sallie Neblett
DD-T Staff Writer

LELAND — A local Episcopal priest Friday presented his analysis of "the path which led to the near destruction of a community."

The community was Grenada and the priest was the Rev. Columbus Smith who lived in the community from the fall of 1964 until August of 1966. He is now rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Leland.

Rev. Smith told members of the Leland Rotary Club that the point of his talk was "not to berate or downgrade the town of Grenada."

"This could pertain to any town anywhere," he said. "I only use Grenada as a backdrop because I lived there prior to and during the summer of 1966."

HE EXPLAINED that when he moved to Grenada, he found a city of 12,000 in a county of 20,000 racially mixed about 50 per cent white and 50 per cent Negro sustained by industry, beef and cotton "in that order."

"The town philosophy and policy are made by a few men — good men — mostly banking interests," he said, "as the town philosophy and policy are made in most towns."

Rev. Smith said that although Interstate 55, U.S. Highway 51 and the Illinois Central Railroad run through Grenada, his opinion was "that world and time had somehow passed Grenada by."

It was a beautiful town, filled with warm, loving people, he said, but it was a "tight little island, closely knitted" in all respects of life.

"THE COMMUNITY was so intent on maintaining the status quo and keeping things the way they always were — so blinded by short term anxieties — that it was unable to think about its excellent opportunities for the future," he said.

"Now these opportunities are gone for a season," he said, "and my guess is that they will not reappear for a generation."

"A generation which is as proud of its history as anyone, but which will not be shackled and used by its history; a generation which will use its history as free men — unfettered men — who find their way through this life on a rational basis," he said.



REV. SMITH

ganized labor and to the racial status quo by the civil rights groups.

In discussing the battle between the town and organized labor, he said, "It was a community effort the likes of which I have never witnessed."

"GRENADA in 1964 was unchanged since the turn of the century," he said, "housing the nonwhite portion was is bad, there were little paved streets."

Rev. Smith described a incident which occurred the first week after to the city. "A teen boy was walking to school. He was with a coat and he was walking down

nada street, four 20-year-olds from another county beat him up so badly that he lost the sight of one eye because of the way he was dressed.

"This type of incident has happened in the Florida town in which I was born. It has happened in Leland. It happens everywhere, but in Grenada there was no investigation," he said.

"Crime is going to be with us and prejudice and hate," he said, "but where a double standard of law enforcement exists it has to undermine the morale of the law enforcement establishment and the morals of the community."

HE SPOKE of the 27 Southern Christian Leadership Conference workers who arrived in Grenada in September of 1965. "They were tough but they left in 36 hours when they could find no place to eat or sleep or hold their meetings."

"One of them yelled out of the car window as they left town. 'We'll be back' is what he yelled," Rev. Smith said.

"I pleaded with the community to make some move — any move of the type which this area has been doing for a long time," he said. "But I learned there is nothing — absolutely nothing — so ineffectual or ineffective as a preacher trying to do something without the backing of his church board or membership."

He said there was a majority of citizens in Grenada who were reasonable and rational, but the reason they wouldn't do something to prevent "what was sure to come" was they were afraid of what someone might say.

"THEIR FAMILIES, jobs, friends and social status were involved," he said.

"I must believe," he said, "if just one responsible citizen

had spoken for moderation and rationality, he would have been surrounded by a large group."

"As late as May, a citizen told me over a cup of coffee, 'They will never be in our schools. They will never be in our churches. They will never be employed in our business establishments.'"

"THEN IN JUNE, 1,200 came. There were 2,000 new registered voters; no institution was left untouched; there was new leadership in the Negro community with the old lines of communication cut; and, to add injury to insult, organized labor made its first victory that week," he said.

He explained organized labor's victory as the unionization of a local industry.

"Grenada was brought to its knees and made to eat the bitter fruit of change — disorderly, irrational change — by the

truckload instead of orderly, rational change by the spoonful," he said.

Rev. Smith described the upheaval as causing a "leadership vacuum" which existed until the Mississippi Highway Patrol "filled it and stabilized it through the summer and fall."

HE FURTHER stated that he had the utmost respect for the patrol and complimented its handling of the situation.

"In my opinion there was a serious, indeed a fundamental, breakdown of the political structure," he said. "Every government is theoretical until it is participated in by those governed by it."

He described Grenada's city manager as being "one of the finest city managers I have ever known, a good man, a smart man who gave his whole being to the community."

But he was so good that he was given more and more re-

sponsibility for the administration of the town, Rev. Smith said. "The city council had very little responsibility."

"Then when the crisis came, there was no body politic, no large group of people on which to place the blame. The city council didn't know what to do and when in the middle of the situation the city manager called for rationality, they did the only thing they knew to do. They fired him."

REV. SMITH said, "It was nobody's fault and it was everybody's fault. The lights of reason and rationality went out fast in Grenada and they are going out fast all over this world . . . and it frightens me."

As he thought about the situation, he said, he took out the dollar bill and looked at the Latin mottoes on the back which mean "God smiles on us" and "A new order of the ages."

He said when we fought the Revolutionary War and formed the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, our government was and it still is a new order of the ages.

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"It can not and must not be taken for granted," he said. "It is something you have to care for and value — something we have to participate in, be involved in, give taxes for, die for and be vigilant to keep."